

Western Governors University Receives NCATE Accreditation
First Non-Traditional Provider for NCATE;
Helps Prepare Non-Traditional Candidates in High Need Fields

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At its fall board meeting, NCATE conferred accreditation on the Teachers College at Western Governors University (WGU), marking the first time a non-traditional provider has received the designation. In 2001, NCATE changed its standards from a focus on inputs to a focus on outcomes, in part to anticipate the accreditation of non-traditional providers, and WGU is the first to engage the opportunity. The accrediting body operates a performance-based system which requires those entities applying for accreditation to provide evidence that candidates have the knowledge and skills to be effective in helping all students learn. NCATE examined 70 institutions at its fall meeting.

WGU is a non-profit university (www.wgu.edu), created by the governors of 19 states to expand student access to higher education and help ensure its affordability. Western Governors has received institutional accreditation from four regional accrediting commissions, and has been aided by a \$10 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education. WGU's Teachers College was designed to address the growing need for high quality teachers through online, competency-based degree and licensure programs. While the offices of Western Governors University are located in Salt Lake City, UT, the university has students in all 50 states, 10 foreign countries, and 3 U.S. territories. There are teacher candidates in all 50 states.

Eighty-five percent of WGU students are from underserved populations. Underserved populations are classified by WGU as either economically disadvantaged, rural, first generation college student, Hispanic, African American, Native American, or a combination of two or more of these categories. The average age of students is 36; most (77 percent) are female. Most (85 percent) are employed, the large majority of them full-time.

The current enrollment in Teachers College is 4500 candidates; approximately 600 candidates for licensure will graduate this year.

Dr. Janet Schnitz, Executive Director of the Teachers College, says, "It is a privilege to provide expanded access to so many who have lacked the opportunity to achieve their dream of becoming highly qualified teachers. To have our contribution recognized and endorsed by NCATE as the first non-traditional program to achieve NCATE's rigorous accreditation is an extraordinary recognition of our candidates' efforts to master the competencies of teaching."

Dr. Philip Schmidt, NCATE Coordinator and Director of Curriculum and Instruction, says, "I am proud to be a part of this extraordinary institution and of its Teachers College. Participating in the process through which our Teachers College earned NCATE accreditation was a professional joy for me, and throughout the NCATE accreditation process, I was impressed by the ways in which the NCATE examiners showed an appreciation for WGU's landmark online, competency-based

model.”

Dr. Robert Mendenhall, President of Western Governors University, said upon hearing of the NCATE accreditation decision, "WGU is rapidly becoming one of the largest teacher education programs in the country, and as we have teacher education graduates seeking licensure in all 50 states, it was important for us to have NCATE accreditation in addition to our own quality standards. We are very pleased with the growing acceptance of competency-based education not only by students, but by accrediting organizations, state departments of education, school districts, and the U.S. Department of Education. It is a tribute to NCATE that they were willing and able to apply their standards of quality to a non-traditional program that is both online and that measures learning rather than time."

The accreditation visit was conducted partly through the use of technology, including conference calls and email. Team members visited areas where the largest concentrations of students were located to interview students and gather data on student teaching placements, and also visited the university's headquarters in Salt Lake City .

Although classwork is done online, Western Governors' Teachers College requires pre-student teaching clinical experiences as well as student teaching in a regular classroom. The university has a placement office which works with school districts to find student teaching placements (called demonstration teaching by the university) and Host Teachers. Clinical supervisors are screened and trained by the university. Candidates spend at least 12 weeks in Demonstration Teaching.

Arthur Wise, NCATE President, notes that "this decision by NCATE should signal to the education community and the public that NCATE has the capacity to review non-traditional providers to determine the quality of their teacher preparation programs. NCATE has an interest in ensuring that all types of providers meet rigorous professional standards, so that teachers pursuing different pathways into teaching all have an opportunity to experience a high quality preparation program."

NCATE is recognized as a specialized accrediting body for teacher preparation in the United States by the U. S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, and accredits 636 colleges of education that produce over two-thirds of the nation's new teacher graduates annually.